LONGMANS'

HISTORY OF INDIA

(FROM THE BEGINNING TO A.D. 1526)



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Vedic Literature

The only sources from which we derive our knowledge of the Indo-Aryans is their sacred literature known as the Vedic literature. It comprises the four Vedic Samhitas and other allied compositions like the Brahmanas, the Aranyakas, the Upanishadas, the Sutras, the Vedangas and the Upavedas. The four Samhitas are Rig, Sama, Yajur, and Atharva. Of these, the Rigveda Samhita is regarded as the oldest; in fact, the oldest literary monument in the literature of the world. It contains 1,017 hymns arranged in ten books or *Mandala*.[1] The Samaveda consists, for the most part, of hymns taken from the Rigveda and has little or no independent historical value. The hymns are arranged mainly with a reference to their utility in the performance of the Soma sacrifice, and for this purpose are set to music or special tunes. The Yajur, like the Sama, also borrows much material from the Rigveda. The prayer hymns thus borrowed are put in the order in which they were to be recited at the time of certain sacrifices. The prose portion of the Yajur, however, gives a good deal of information about the sacrificial ritual. The Atharvaveda, though not so valuable as a piece of literary work, is important from the standpoint of the development of Aryan civilization and culture. It contains hymns dealing mostly with popular spells and charms for keeping away demons, diseases and enemies and thus preserves a strata of popular cults and superstitions which were being added to the original Aryan beliefs.

The Brahmanas are essentially in prose and were designed to explain the meaning and substance of the Vedic texts. These are, in a way, commentaries on the Samhitas written by learned priests. Each of the four Samhitas has its own Brahmana or commentary. The need for writing these explanatory or help-books was probably felt at the time when the old language in which the Rigveda was composed came to be forgotten and new forms of speech came in vogue.

The Aranyakas are treatises written in addition to the Brahmanas to give directions to the priests regarding the performance of Yajnas, etc. But besides these directions, the Aranyakas also contained expositions offered by the most learned men of the age on life and its allied problems, like creation, birth, death, matter, soul and God. Since these subtle and speculative problems required sustained concentration, the sages who chose to tackle them always retired into forests (*Aranya*) far away from crowded cities and haunts of men; hence the books they made were called

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are mentioned as In-da-ra (Indra), Mi-it-ra (Mitra) and U-ru-w-na (Varuna). It is clear from these documents that Vedic gods were worshipped in Asia Minor at least as early as 1400 B.C.

[1]All these hymns are believed to have been composed by the families of the Rishis like Vishwamitra, Bhardwaj and Vashista. The Hindu belief is that the word of God was directly revealed to these Rishis.